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SUBJECT: Syrian Intentions in Lebanon and the Golan Heights

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NESA M 86-20060

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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

28 April 1986

Syrian Intentions in Lebanon and the Golan Heights

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Summary

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Syria is under no political or economic pressure to force a showdown with Israel while the peace process is dead. Instead, Damascus seems intent upon probing Israel's "red lines" in Lebanon

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Over the longer term Syria is preparing for a major confrontation with Israel.

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In our judgment, Assad recognizes the risks of a major war but believes that in the right circumstances later this decade he can orchestrate either a conflict or the threat of war to secure major Israeli concessions.

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Although political and military factors suggest Syria will seek to postpone a showdown until the Syrian military is better prepared,

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This memorandum was prepared by the Levant Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis and the Office of Scientific and Weapons Research. Information as of 28 April 1986 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments may be addressed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division.

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] On balance, however, we believe his calculating style of decisionmaking will continue to encourage a cautious approach to conflict. [REDACTED]

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Damascus' Current Anxieties

The US airstrike on Libya on April 14 sharpened traditional Syrian fears of US-Israeli collusion and led Damascus to put its military forces on full alert. [REDACTED]

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We have no indications these current tensions are a cover for an attack on Israel either in Lebanon or across the Golan Heights. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Moreover, Syria probably is worried over its ability to adequately defend itself against an Israeli attack. [REDACTED]

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Despite its current jitters, we believe Damascus is increasingly confident about its long term ability to stand up to Tel Aviv. Events in Lebanon, particularly the abrogation of the 17 May 1983 Accord and the withdrawal of Israeli troops, have encouraged Damascus to increase its provocations of Israel. In southern Lebanon, for example, Assad has widely advertised Syria's sponsorship of suicide operations aimed at eliminating Israel's residual presence and that of its surrogate, the Army of South Lebanon. Syria's most dramatic success in its brinkmanship with Israel resulted from the so-called missile crisis set in motion by the Israeli shootdown of two Syrian MIG-23 fighters on 19 November 1985. [REDACTED]

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Since early this year, Damascus has been reclaiming territory in the southern Bekaa Valley abandoned by Israel last year. [redacted] the Syrians are constructing additional artillery positions near the Qir'wan Dam and at Kafr Mishki and Rashayya. [redacted]

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[redacted] the Syrians are constructing antitank ditches just north of Ayn at Tinah and Ayn Ata--near their southernmost positions prior to June 1982. [redacted]

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The Syrians are proceeding cautiously, moving only in small numbers and probing the limits of Israeli forbearance. Before moving into south Lebanon in force, Damascus may try to ensure it can support such a deployment by increasing the size of its force in the Bekaa Valley. [redacted]

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Syria clearly intends to reduce the Israeli presence in Lebanon, but Assad is a cautious and patient strategist who will avoid precipitous action that could lead to a military debacle. Syria is under no pressure--political or economic--to move while the peace process is dead. Assad will go to war, but only when he is confident of Syrian ability to extract a sufficiently high price from Israel to force concessions. Assad must be confident that Syria can be spared massive Israeli retaliation--presumably through a combination of strategic deterrence and superpower intervention--to make the risks of war acceptable. [redacted]

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The Longer Term: Strategic Balance

Damascus is preoccupied with concerns about Tel Aviv's behavior in the near term and the Lebanon issue, but the Syrian leadership has not lost sight of its long-term goal of attaining "strategic parity" with Israel and regaining the Golan Heights.

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Our information on Assad's long term plans is limited. We believe Syrian contingency plans call for a quick strike to seize at least Mount Hermon and the northern part of the Golan Heights,

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followed by a call for a cease-fire. Assad probably is counting heavily on achieving surprise. We [] believe the Syrians would try to attack from a "cold start," i.e., with little prior buildup from their routine garrisons close to the UN-monitored cease-fire lines. Assad probably is banking that superpower involvement will force a cease-fire before the Israelis can bring superior forces to bear. []

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For many reasons, Assad has never defined specifically the point at which strategic parity will be reached. He knows a Syrian attack on Israel would pose a major risk to the survival of his minority Alawite regime and Syria's territorial integrity. We believe he would prefer to regain the Golan Heights through a combination of threats, brinksmanship, and diplomacy, but to do so requires a credible military option. Embassy [] reporting suggests Assad believes US support for Israel makes a satisfactory negotiated settlement impossible at present; he sees military force--or at least the threat of conflict--as the only realistic long term option to serve Arab goals. []

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A critical uncertainty in Syrian military thinking is the effort to develop a strategic deterrent to prevent Israeli retaliation against Syria's infrastructure. Assad remembers vividly Israel's airstrikes on Syrian economic targets during the 1973 war and has sought to prevent repetition. []

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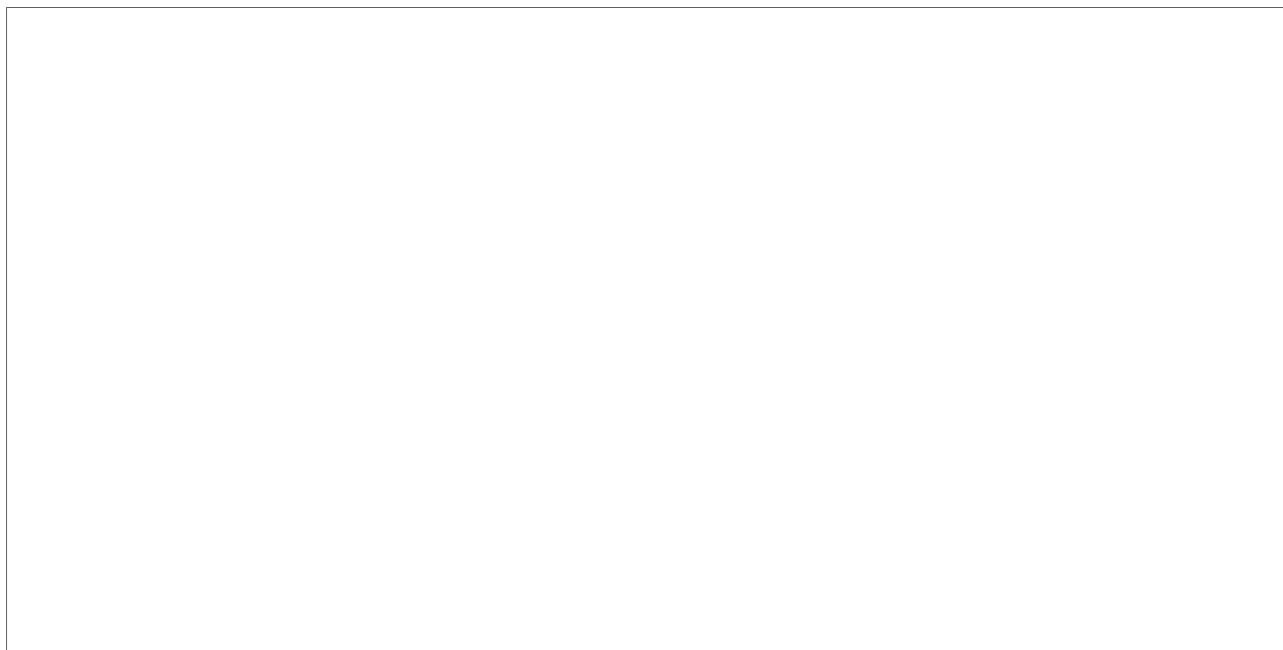
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